

Class Three: Wittgenstein's Expressivism

Doing Things with Words - Ryan Simonelli

January 18, 2022

1 The Linguistic Phenomenon in Question

- **The Basic Question:** Consider the sentence "I'm in pain!" said by me, for instance, at the dentist's office. How should we understand this sentence and what I say (or do) in uttering it?
- **The Standard (Fregean) Construal:** Recall Frege's distinction between sentences that express *thoughts*—true or false—and those that don't.
 - **Express Thoughts:** Declarative sentences like "The cat is on the mat."
 - **Don't Express Thoughts:** Imperatives like "shut the door" and exclamatives like "Yay!" or "Ouch!"

By this construal, "I'm in pain" expresses a thought—the thought that I, Ryan Simonelli, am in pain. It's true just in case I'm in pain.

- **Extrapolating from this Construal:** Pain is particular mental state, a state of consciousness, identifiable in terms of its "phenomenal character," what it feels like from the inside. When I say "I'm in pain" I refer to a particular person (myself: Ryan S.) and I ascribe this state of consciousness to this person.

2 Puzzles Brought On by this Picture and Their Resolution

- **The Idea of Private Experience:** I pinch my hand and feel a pain. What is it that I am referring to when I speak of "this pain." The sensation, of course. But what can I say about this sensation?
 - It can seem that I know what it's like, and so I can pick it out in terms of it's character, but there's nothing I can really say to adequately describe what it is.
 - It also seems that the character of the experience *you* have when you your
- **Wittgenstein on These Ideas:**
 - "The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person possesses his own specimen, but that nobody knows whether other people also have *this* or something else. The assumption would thus be possible – though unverifiable – that one section of mankind had one visual impression of red, and another section another," (§272).
 - "[I]s it also conceivable that there be a language in which a person could write down or give voice to his inner experiences a his feelings, moods, and so on a for his own use? [. . .] The words of this language are to refer to what only the speaker can know – to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language," (§243).

Note: There are often two voices engagin in dialogue in the investigations, and so not everything that appears in the text is something that Wittgenstein himself endorses. These passages come from the voice with which he's engaging, known as his "interlocutor."

- **The Private Diary:** “Let’s imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign ‘S’ and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. – I first want to observe that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. – But all the same, I can give one to myself as a kind of ostensive definition! – How? Can I point to the sensation? – Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. – But what is this ceremony for? For that is all it seems to be! A definition serves to lay down the meaning of a sign, doesn’t it? – Well, that is done precisely by concentrating my attention; for in this way I commit to memory the connection between the sign and the sensation. – But ‘I commit it to memory’ can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection *correctly* in the future. But in the present case, I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem correct to me is correct. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘correct’,” (§258).
 - **A General Point About Rules:** “That’s why ‘following a rule’ is a practice. And to *think* one is following a rule is not to follow a rule. And that’s why it’s not possible to follow a rule ‘privately’; otherwise thinking one was following a rule would be the same thing as following it,” (§202).
- **Question:** What’s Wittgenstein’s point here? Is he expressing a kind skepticism about memory?
- **The “Stage-Setting” Involved in Our Normal Namings of Sensations:** “When one says ‘He gave a name to his sensation’, one forgets that much must be prepared in the language for mere naming to make sense. And if we speak of someone’s giving a name to a pain, the grammar of the word ‘pain’ is what has been prepared here; it indicates the post where the new word is stationed,” (§257).
 - **This Stage-Setting Is Stipulated to be Lacking in this Example:** “What reason have we for calling ‘S’ the sign for a *sensation*? For ‘sensation’ is a word of our common language, which is not a language intelligible only to me. So the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands,” (§261)
- **Wittgenstein’s Beetle in the Box:** “Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a ‘beetle’. No one can ever look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. – But what if these people’s word “beetle” had a use nonetheless? – If so, it would not be as the name of a thing. The thing in the box doesn’t belong to the language-game at all; not even as a *Something*: for the box might even be empty,” (§293).
 - **The Point:** Like “beetle” in the above example, “pain,” on the standard picture—where it is conceived of as a name of a thing that can figure in the expression of thoughts, true or false—has no role in a language game. As such, there is no way to make sense of what it actually signifies.
- **Changing the Grammar:** “But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour with pain and pain-behaviour without pain.” – Admit it? What greater difference could there be? – “And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a Nothing.” – Not at all. It’s not a *Something*, but not a *Nothing* either! The conclusion was only that a *Nothing* would render the same service as a *Something* about which nothing could be said. We’ve only rejected the grammar which tends to force itself on us here.
 The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or whatever,” (§304).

3 Wittgenstein on Two Uses of "I"

- **"I" as Object and Subject:** There are two different cases in the use of the word "I" (or "my") which I might call "the use as object" and "the use as subject". Examples of the first kind of use are these: "My arm is broken", "I have grown six inches", "I have a bump on my forehead", "The wind blows my hair about". Examples of the second kind are: "I see so-and-so", "I hear so-and-so", "I try to lift my arm", "I think it will rain", "I have a toothache." (BB 66-67).
- **Question:** Do we have an intuitive grip on the distinction that Wittgenstein is getting at here?
- **Wittgenstein's Epistemological Criterion:** In the first kind of case, I can be wrong in thinking that the person I'm ascribing a broken arm to, for instance, is really me, and in the second kind of case, I can't.
 - **A Grotesque Example:** Suppose I'm in a terrible train crash, and there are bodies scattered among the wreckage. Consider the following two cases:
 - * **"I" as Object:** I see the my arm, tangled in the wreckege, clearly broken, and exclaim "My arm is broken!" In fact, however, this is not my own arm, but the arm of someone else.
 - * **"I" as Subject:** Same scenario, but I yell out, "I'm in pain." Clearly, it cannot be anyone else but me who is in pain.

4 A Role-First Approach

- **Remark on the Grammar of Pain:** "To say 'I have pain' is no more a statement *about* a particular person than moaning is," (BB, 67).
 - The function of "I," in this sentence, isn't to pick out a particular person to whom pain can be ascribed. If anything, it plays the expressive role of indicating that I'm not ascribing pain to anyone: I'm not performing a speech act in which I'm referring to somebody and ascribing a property to them. I'm performing a different type of act, one more akin to moaning.

"All this comes down to saying that the person of whom we say 'he has pain' is, by the rules of the game, the person who cries, contorts his face, etc," (BB, 68).
- **Pain Replaces Crying:** "How do words refer to sensations? – There doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about sensations every day, and name them? But how is the connection between the name and the thing named set up? This question is the same as: How does a human being learn the meaning of names of sensations? For example, of the word "pain". Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, natural, expressions of sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.

"So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?" – On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying, it does not describe it," (PI §244).
- **Question:** What about experiences that we don't express, for whatever reason? For instance, what about when we're in pain but we don't. Or traumatic emotions that we don't express due to shock? Does what Wittgenstein says here rule out such cases?